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Profiles

Profile of Dr. Lauren Smith, Research Associate at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow and Vision Speaker at the 33rd Annual NASIG Conference

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Dr. Lauren Smith will be one of three vision speakers at the upcoming 33rd Annual NASIG Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. She is a knowledge manager at the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (Iriss) in Glasgow, Scotland, where her area of concentration is the use of information literacy capacities for identifying and using different forms of evidence and knowledge in professional practice. She is also a researcher-librarian interested in issues around information, agency, and equity. I completed my



Photo courtesy of Lauren Smith

interview with Dr. Smith by e-mail on Monday, February 19, 2018.

How have the considerations of privacy in libraries changed in recent years?

In the United Kingdom, there's been a noticeable increase in discussions about the role of libraries and protecting patron privacy. The focus seems to have shifted, slowly and only a little, from policies and practices that are centered around ensuring that people using library resources don't break rules and don't do things librarians don't want them doing, to empowering people and ensuring they are safe and secure in their use of library resources as well as in the wider world. Progress has been slow and there are still a lot of barriers in the way, but there definitely seems to be an increasing awareness and desire to change what are now seen as bugs and not features within things like acceptable use policies, library usage reporting and records, and digital security standards. Professional bodies and organizations across the United Kingdom are engaging in discussions around privacy and security, how to increase digital participation, and how to connect public services to human rights indicators that talk about citizen empowerment and the agency needed to make informed decisions when it comes to protecting their privacy.

Have you experienced situations of surveillance restricting the curiosity of the users of libraries?

Surveillance takes different forms, and passive surveillance has been observed to have a chilling effect on people's information seeking and curiosity in

general. I've had people talk to me in my research around the United Kingdom's Investigatory Powers Act about how they've changed their interests to be more palatable to people who might take an interest in what they're searching for online—writers who have made the conscious decision not to explore certain avenues of enquiry for their investigative journalism because they see a genuine threat in doing so. I'm going to touch on this in my talk at the NASIG conference because it's something that often sounds like tin foil hattery but is a very real problem with very real implications for freedom of inquiry and freedom of speech.

Is digital literacy the next emergence of information literacy?

The more I work around literacies the less of a fixed opinion I have about the relationship between different literacies! My gut instinct is to say no; I think there's a lot of overlap when it comes to the skills and competencies needed to access and find information, knowledge, or evidence, but information literacy as a field touches on a lot of competencies, attitudes, and conceptions that I don't think fall within the area of digital literacy and instead speak to principles of evaluation, critical thought, and synthesis of knowledge that fall within other domains. A lot of work in a lot of areas of literacies has value for the library and information profession, and I think it's important not to be too tribal when it comes to using resources to improve your practice. However, I find it does help to have some kind of an understanding of the history and shape of the field you're looking at so that you can understand where tensions or frictions arise in the work you might be engaging with.

I also think it's important to use whatever tool best fits the particular context you find yourself in, or a combination. It's about using whatever term you use to communicate what problem you're trying to solve or gap you're trying to fill. In my current role we're not using the word literacy at all, let alone talking about what kind of literacy it is, because "information literacy" doesn't mean anything to most people working in social services. It doesn't mean they're not already engaging

with the concepts within it, so it's about finding ways of supporting people that they're ready and happy to engage with.

Where do you believe is the role of libraries in social justice movements?

I think there's often a difference between the role of libraries and the role of library workers. In terms of libraries, providing access to information, protecting the privacy and security of people working within social justice movements, and acting to create and protect public records are valuable contributions to creating the conditions for social justice. I recently saw a talk by Meredith Evans (vice president/president-elect of the Society of American Archivists and director of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library) where she spoke about the work done at Washington University Libraries to [document Ferguson](#). The library created the infrastructure for documents and artifacts to be collected, recorded, kept, and made accessible. This kind of work makes an incredibly important contribution in all kinds of ways for social justice movements, not only for creating visibility and a record that they were there, but I'm sure for boosting morale and encouraging change.

What is the role of access in library services?

I always think of access as being the underlying condition to any progress that can be achieved through knowledge and learning. This tweet from Alba Gutiérrez really summed it up for me:

["Access to information is not curiosity. It is a precondition for exercising other Rights, fundamental for democracy, and an essential tool for advancing in gender agenda"](#)

Access can take many forms—making buildings physically and psychologically usable for people; making information architecture on library websites, catalogues, and systems usable for people with their wide range of needs; making it possible to access information and knowledge that would otherwise be unaffordable or hidden away. I think there's a way to

support access in a whole lot of ways within library and information services, and there are so many opportunities we can take to listen to our communities, advocate for change, and actively work to increase access wherever we are.

What are the common challenges facing libraries in the United Kingdom and the United States?

Despite the very different funding systems in the United Kingdom and the United States, underfunding is a shared problem. Although perhaps more apparent in the U.K. public library system for many years now, there's always a call to do more with less wherever you are, and I don't know at what point it will be accepted that this just isn't possible. I think many of my U.S. and U.K. colleagues share the sense that library and information services are being set up to fail. The need to demonstrate public value whilst fending off frequent assumptions from funders and the (non-library-using) public that libraries are no longer relevant now that "everybody" has all the information they could possibly need at their fingertips is definitely a shared issue. All this while trying to meet extortionate vendor costs and trying to work out how to push back, ensure access to the resources people need, and encourage the people generating the knowledge to share it in more socially just ways. Yes, definitely plenty of shared challenges!

What are some of the differences?

As well as the different funding structures, there's a different level of qualification required for many jobs. For example, school librarians in the United Kingdom are not statutory, often don't have a Master's degree in librarianship, and extremely few have qualified status as teachers (and those that do often do because they've switched from teaching to librarianship). Academic librarians usually do need to have a Master's degree in librarianship, but this is commonly the only postgraduate qualification they have. I wouldn't like to make generalizations about how this affects the quality of work done, but I do think it limits our ability to advocate for our contribution, for example, to educational outcomes in secondary schools, or for how

we can support academic researchers in specific subject areas making decisions about their scholarly publishing or research approach. There's also much less of a tradition in the United Kingdom for librarians to do their own research and publishing (tenure track not being a thing in the United Kingdom, so there being less drive for it), which I think is a missed opportunity in many ways, but I also wouldn't want to push for this to happen in a context where people weren't acknowledged for this labor in their workplaces.

Do you have any additional comments?

Just to say that I'm very much looking forward to my trip to Atlanta this summer and can't wait to have a good chat with people!